

Comment: *Humour in the Catholic Church*

You need a good sense of humour, these days, to be a Roman Catholic. Perhaps one has needed that all along.

No one has pointed this out as candidly and entertainingly as Hans Urs von Balthasar, the great Swiss theologian who died unexpectedly in 1988, aged 82, at home in Basel, two days before he was due to be installed as a Cardinal by Pope John Paul II, an honour he did not welcome. He had been measured for the robes.

By 1974, when he published *Der antirömische Affekt* (1974), the onetime maverick, who left the Jesuits in 1950 for the secular institute he co-founded with the visionary mystic Adrienne Kaegi-von Speyr, was already the favourite theologian of Catholics disillusioned by the aftermath of Vatican II. Retitled as *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* the translation (1986) does not convey the stated aim of the book, which is to show 'the deep-seated anti-Roman attitude within the Catholic Church'.

By no means a recent phenomenon, characteristic of the allegedly 'liberal' 1960s, as one might have thought, opposition within the Church to the Petrine ministry has, according to Balthasar, a permanent basis in theology as well as sociological and historical grounds. It is structural. Of course there has always been "a healthy popular sentiment that is faithful to Rome without being blind to the faults and human failings of the curia and even of the pope". Much more deeply, however, the Catholic Church is 'a tension of forces', from the outset and in every age. This makes 'contest within the Church herself' ineluctable — 'mostly against the Petrine principle. But it could just as well be against pneumaticism or theological rationalism or the claimed dominance of exegesis' (page 314).

Here, of course, one remembers Newman's Preface to the Third Edition (1877) of *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church* in which he sees the internal dynamic of the Church in terms of the triple functions of liturgical worship, theological reflection, and institutional governance. The first tends to 'superstition and enthusiasm', the second to 'rationalism', and the third to 'ambition, craft and cruelty', each requiring to be corrected by the others — ideally in 'a truce or a compromise'.

Towards the end of his fascinating book — the most provocative account of the papacy by any Catholic theologian — Balthasar devotes a few pages to the thesis that "humour is a mysterious but unmistakable charism inseparable from Catholic faith" (page 303).

Neither the ‘progressives’ nor the ‘integralists’ seem to possess much sense of humour — ‘the latter even less than the former’, he says. “Both of these tend to be faultfinders, malicious satirists, grumblers, carping critics, full of bitter scorn, know-it-all who think they have the monopoly of infallible judgment; they are self-legitimizing prophets – in short, fanatics”.

The word ‘fanatic’, Balthasar explains in parenthesis, derives from the Latin *fanum*, ‘holy place’, so that fanatics may be described as ‘guardians of the temple threshold, transported into frenzy by the Divinity’.

‘They are ill-humoured, as was Jansenism *in toto*, which spread like a blight, for centuries, over the spiritual life of France’. Indeed, Balthasar suggests, perhaps Georges Bernanos (1888–1948, author of *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, 1936) and Paul Claudel (1868–1955, *Le Soulier de Satin*, 1931) were the first Catholics in France to be ‘completely free’ of Jansenist gloom. If not just a tease, that is a suggestion that would require some unpacking.

Balthasar’s dislike of ‘these humourless hard-liners’ becomes yet more eloquent: “They are rigid, while the Catholic is pliable, flexible, yielding” — why? — “because the latter’s firmness is not based on himself and his own opinion but on God, who is ‘ever-greater’—*semper major*,” — the Jesuit motto which remained deep in Balthasar’s soul.

The ‘progressives’ (of the 1960s and ‘70s) were “fanatically ‘come of age’”, Balthasar says sardonically, while the *intégristes* (by which he means Catholics, in communion with Rome, not followers of Archbishop Lefebvre and such) are “fanatically immature” — a rather odd put-down, explained (however) by the way they “clamour for the tangible exercise of papal authority and elevate to the status of dogma things that are not, such as communion on the tongue and all kinds of apparitions of the Mother of God, etc.”

“Not all [in the Catholic Church] possess the balance that we have indicated by the reference to humour” (page 304). One example of humorous Catholic response to the Reformation would be the *putti* in Baroque sanctuaries in Bavaria. More persuasively perhaps, Balthasar invokes Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*, concluding that GKC’s work shows that “only the Catholic form guarantees the miraculous quality of being, the freedom, the sense of being a child, of adventure, the resilient, energizing paradox of existence”.

We should need, of course, to distinguish humour from frivolity, scorn and cynicism — much more common antidotes to tensions in the Catholic Church.

Fergus Kerr OP